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ABSTRACT

A proposal that the English as a second language (ESL) curriculum should initially focus on psycholinguistic reading is discussed. It is claimed that effective reading is difficult to achieve using the present ordering of the ESL curriculum. This is because of the heavy focus on learning active command of grammatical detail during the early, formative period of language training. That is, the focus on grammatical contrasts emphasizes the very structures that will hinder reading. Structural contrasts should be subordinated to pragmatic uses of language (i.e., to content). It is suggested that content is not only the goal of reading but the means by which reading is made efficient. Examples of Hebrew, which is written without most vowels, are provided to illustrate that words can be understood without them. It is claimed that although normal English does contain vowels, they are not important for reading purposes. Examples are also provided of "tlgrfx" in the native language. Reading of tlgrfx-texts can help train the ESL learner to ignore vowels in an appropriately general way. The point is to avoid requiring active command of structures, from phonetics to syntax and lexicon. These psycholinguistic techniques can be used in the beginning in small quantities in an existing curriculum. A strategy for placing vocabulary in reading lessons is suggested. Emphasis is placed on comprehension rather than on the more detailed type that tends to become memory work. Russian language examples are also included. (SW)

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Exolexia*

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When a centipede crosses his legs, he'd better not do it too carefully, because if he starts paying attention to his feet, he's bound to trip over some of them. Reading is similar. This can be seen by looking at 2a on the hand-out, which is actually easier to read if held further away. Parallel examples are found in those typographical errors that pass readers and proof-readers unnoticed, as well as in the many ambiguities that normal reading ignores--prepositions, for example, are each 10 or more ways ambiguous.

Such examples demonstrate psycholinguistic reading principles. The best as well as most exciting exposition of these principles is still Smith's '73 Psychology & Reading, although more recent work has added new dimensions to the original insight. Modern ESL theory has generally accepted it, and my proposal will simply be to apply it a great deal further than is generally thought possible. In any case, it should be sufficient to review its basics briefly, as in 1a-b.

1a notes that content is the basic level upon which a text operates for the native reader. The actual orthographic text is not so much analyzed as scanned, the reader does not absorb and decode its detail as much as he predicts or guesses in the process of forming a coherent picture of its content. Thus the reading process is not a algorithmic one, one where the given text is analyzed in such a way as to give definite single right answers, but rather a heuristic one, one where flexible strategies of comprehension come up with probable answers.

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*Reading in a foreign language, based on Gk. lexe 'word' and exo 'outside'.

1a notes how content thus overrides not only ambiguities and typographical errors, but even those multitudes of grammatical details that can be more effectively ignored. There is a potential conflict between comprehension and grammatical detail, and, for the native speaker, this conflict is resolved in favor of comprehension. Content is not only the goal of reading: it is also the means by which reading is made efficient. It is ironic how we expect non-native speakers of English to process grammar, to a much greater extent than native speakers do.

My claim is in fact that ESL learners should not be expected to achieve effective reading, given the present ordering of curriculum. For we expect them to focus heavily on learning active command of grammatical detail for the early, formative period of their language training, and then, within a year or two, to begin making the transition, with little specific training, to the kind of reading where they are supposedly ignoring all those details that they have struggled so hard to learn.

I propose for this reason that the focus on psycholinguistic reading should begin as early as possible--indeed I will suggest that it can begin at the very beginning of curriculum. The separateness of the reading skill should be established as strongly as possible, with reading becoming an additional source of linguistic input that can contribute to all aspects of linguistic development.

To show the possibility of an early beginning, in the abstract, let us look at my sample of Hebrew, in 3a, selected from a larger demonstration lesson that I have run my ESL students through. 3a shows the normal orthography of Hebrew; in addition to being written from right to left, it is written without most vowels. Nevertheless, it is not difficult to figure out words and letters with a little help; as my larger demo lesson shows, it is quite easy to learn them as well.

3b shows the additional diacritic symbols used for representing phonetic detail when the need arises. It may be clear even from this tiny selection that the diacritics are much harder than the letters, and even the pronunciation 'Shimshon' for

Samson is more easily learned without the dubious help they offer. It is odd that, until recently, the diacritics have been used as an initial teaching alphabet for L2 learners of Hebrew. They are, to be sure, a valued crutch to those who take pleasure in reading aloud without knowing the language and insecure learners generally. The false comfort they offer does not offset its inefficiency, even, as noted, for elementary stages of learning.

Normal English does contain vowels, and yet these vowels are no more important for reading purposes. This is why 2a-b are so comprehensible. It is no accident that vowels are all of the same size and general shape. The ESL learner, of course, does valiant battle with them on phonetic and morphological levels, learning, for example that between /t/ and /k/ the sequence -oo- is pronounced /u/ and represents past tense.

At the very least, more extensive effort should be made both to explain and to practice psycholinguistic reading. Explaining can be done with the help of samples of "tlgrfx" in the native language, as mentioned in 4a. Discussion of the subtle power of reading process can thus help the student wean himself away from the grammatical focus of earlier studies of English.

A quantity of specific practice in reading texts in English, distorted after the fashion of 2a, will also contribute to fluency.

Along with general practice of skimming and scanning with normal texts, reading of tlgrfx-texts can help specifically train the ESL learner to ignore vowels in an appropriately general way.

This is a completely natural exercise with classified ads, as shown in 4c. But I recommend wider application of the technique, not only to TV pages, but indeed to any sort of material, especially material that can be conveniently broken down into separate small articles.

A related technique is spattered-page comprehension or cloze-comprehension. In cloze-comprehension, it will be noted, a cloze-passage is a test of comprehension

alone only for the native speaker: for the non-native speaker it tests active grammatical command as well, and should thus be avoided as a technique to teach reading.

The over-all goals of tlgrfx-based reading exercises are outlined in e: the whole point is to avoid requiring active command of structures, from phonetics to syntax and lexicon. At the same time, maximum focus is directed to the real pragmatic content of language.

All of the above techniques can be injected, at the beginning in small quantities, into an existing curriculum. Even in small doses they will contribute something. But I recommend not only that they be added to, but also that they be taken very seriously from the start. If they are treated as cliche, saluted to but not actualized, they will not contribute much at all. The emotional transition to psycholinguistic reading is a big one, one that can even be frustrating; it is important not to retreat from it into the false comfort that leaves the ESL learner as a functional illiterate, able to pass comprehension tests, but not able to read up to his intellectual ability in content subjects.

I have isolated adult ESL literacy in 5 because here special materials development would be needed to apply the proposal. Even the Laubach series, which is the closest available material to the proposed approach, still differs from it in requiring a high degree of active command, as do all other approaches.

A tlgrfx-based approach would begin teaching reading with a more rigorous focus on initial consonants, where even Laubach lets other consonants and even vowels get dragged into the lessons, in that whole words are copied from the beginning.

As exemplified in 5, pragmatic emphasis is possible--even at the early stages of the envisaged basic literacy program. 'Coffee, tea, milk' are equally 'correct' answers to the given question; their purpose is not to focus on correctness of form, but rather to associate desired meanings with individual consonants. In this they can be contrasted with the more typical kind of non-communicative drill, whose one

answer is preferable only in form.

To return to general curriculum, various more general kinds of activities can also be used, along with tlgrfx-based reading exercises, on all levels.

In a I recommend a general strategy for placing vocabularly properly in reading lessons. Any reading (whether edited or not) can be turned into part of a reading lesson by dividing the vocabularly that is expected to be difficult into three roughly equal groups. The most important group may be taught before the reading, the second group can be tested afterwards, the third group should be ignored.

Further recommendations follow, in b etc.

In c, I recommend radical emphasis on broad aspects of comprehension, rather than the more detailed type that tends to degenerate into memory-work; they undermine psycholinguistic reading, and should rather be handled with some separation, as a sort of scanning question.

Guessing-from-context should similarly be recognized as a skill of learning, rather than one of reading as such. In reading one does not guess the meanings of individual words from context: rather one proceeds directly to comprehension of the content as a whole.

There should be emphasis on problem-solving, e.g., mathematical problems that are expressed verbally. These can be terribly frustrating at the beginning, because they seem to highlight inability in the language. But with practice, the learner can get used to performing these highly cognitive activities in his new language--and that's pretty much what it's all for, after all.

Maximization of real choice means that, not only does the learner choose his own reading, as in reading labs, but that he is not responsible for covering the whole library by the end of the course, in which case his choice is reduced to one of order.

The further suggestions should be self-explanatory.

tlgrfx referred specifically to the orthographic level (even though our examples

since have had broader implications). Let's now focus specifically on the syntactic level.

7 is selected from my demonstration lesson; I think that, with the vocabularly and a little good guesswork on cognates, some of you should get at least one sentence of the Russian. Let us note that the morphological and syntactic structures exemplified in these sentences would take a semester or two to cover in the traditional active perspective. To be sure, heavy use of cognates make the task easier; but the main stumbling block in traditional approached Russian study is the morphology, not the lexicon.

It is important to note, however surprising, that the morphology and syntax of English are at least as hard. This is no secret to anyone who has been bewildered by modern syntax; we can exemplify very briefly by noting that some of the best generalizations about the meanings of categories simply do not work, as exemplified in 8.

In 9-10 I want to focus on a few general concepts that I have developed in line with my approach, which I think are usable by classroom teachers even before specific materials are developed.

For 9, recall that grammar drills can be based on minimal pairs: the purpose of the drill is to make automatic the contrast exemplified by the minimal pair. Minimal pairs have been most typically used, perhaps, in phonetics, but the concept is equally appropriate to any level of grammatical analysis.

My claim is that focus on grammatical contrasts hilites that very structures that will hinder reading. While I am not against the teaching of structural contrasts, of course, I want to be sure to put them in their proper place, namely subordinated to pragmatic uses of language.

There is no better way to ensure this subordination than to teach contrasts after the learner has been dealing with the structures involved. In other words, he should first deal with structures pragmatically, and only afterward learn their

formal details as auxiliary information. This approach to structure is more than inductive; in fact, it is natural in the sense of Terrell.

At the same time, I am formalizing the methods involved, into a sort of 'contrived natural approach.'

As opposed to minimal pairs, a maximal pair demonstrates the absence of formal contrast. There is simply a range (or spectrum) of meanings covered by a given type of structure. 9a demonstrates such a maximal pair, showing that participial clauses can indicate the full range of meanings from precondition to result.

These two ends of the spectrum, along with meanings in between, can be the basis for an ungrammer drill. By paraphrasing the various sentences in such a drill, students learn to deal with structures pragmatically, while noting the variation in meaning. Such an ungrammar drill should, I believe, precede every drill that practices a formal contrast. They can be easily constructed for any level of ESL.

It is generally accepted, although perhaps not so widely practiced, that the learner's passive vocabulary should be much larger than his active vocabulary.

But it is equally important to make a distinction between active and passive grammar. There is no reason for the ESL learner to master all forms of the auxiliary, for example, for active use; but he should be able to manage with them in reading. For this and many other examples, including those in 8, a fundamental distinction should be introduced, as early as possible, between what is valuable to know actively, and what can be known passively, with no more exact goal than comprehension in context.

Even in this general form, passive grammar can be brought into the classroom, as a useful distinction for students to understand, so that not every question requires an exact answer. Much time as well as energy could be saved by extensive use of the distinction.

10 outlines a comprehensive attempt I have made to outline the passive grammar, or reader's grammar analysis of the auxiliary. Among its special implications are:

that various auxiliaries within a column should not be distinguished at early stages--including even will and would. I have argued elsewhere that the distinction between past and pas ive is not really as critical in English as is traditionally believed, so both are identified as 'result.'

A more global implication is the major div.sion into two super-categories 'real' vs. 'imagined'--the latter coinciding with modal auxiliaries. Perhaps most surprising, be and have (along with -s) are identified as meaningless, since they occur in various combinations; the meaningful parts of have taken and have to take, for example, are the -en ending and the prep to.

The purpose of tlgrfx and ungrammar is to train the intuition of the learner, free it from excessive focus on grammatical detail, and direct it to focus on content. Let me conclude with a brief note, therefore, on my current work, which tries to complement the direction outlined here. 'Graphics' is my working title for a study of the form of content. I believe that a direct focus on the form of so-called 'schemata;' could be highly useful to all linguistic skills, and furthermore that it could be carried out in a coherent way on the practical level, however obscure the theoretical notion of schema. My work in progress preliminary defines various schematypes by form, and also by function. With additional notes on the form of form, in a notion of 'structured composition' that I am working on, the best intutive methods for teaching composition can be formulated, as a productive alternative to traditional rhetoric.

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1. psycholinguistic reading mode:
   a. schema-based (text is idea structure; actual text is not analyzed algorithmically, but rather scanned heuristically, to confirm or disconfirm content-based predictions);
   b. selective, hypergrammatical (predicitons not only override ambiguous & typographical errors: details of linguistic structure on all levels are subordinated to content);
   c. for L2 reading: early structural focus & algorithmic reading cannot be fully overcome; structure must be subordinated to content from very beginning, with specific techniques to teach selectivity.

tlgrfx

2. a. Øf yØØ ørØ ØxpørØØncØng dØffØcØltØ Øn Øttømptøng tØ dØcøphØr thØs mØssØgØ, thØn yØØ ørØ prØbØblØ jØst hØldøng thØ pØgØ tØØ dØrn clØsØ.

   b. rdng pwrfl cgntv prcs cmprhnd txt

3. Hebrew orthography
   a. normal

שמשון _____
שמסון _____ (Samson, Sason)

ם _
מ _ (s,m)

   b. with diacritics

מִ מַ שׁ שׂ שָׁמְשׁוֹן שָׂמְסוֹן

mi ma s sh Sason Shimshon

4. tlgrfx-exercises (various levels):
   a. samples in L1, for orientation
   b. practice in tØlØgrØfØx to improve fluency
   c. readings (esp. skimming/scanning) in tlgrfx
      - classified ads (wnt rm-mt t shr frnshd aprtmnt)
      - TV page
      - material on any topic, prepared in encyclopedic format (narrow columns)
   d. spattered-page comprehension, cloze-comprehension
      NB: avoid cloze fill-in (& also reading aloud)
   e. general goals:
      - minimize focus on active command of pronunciation, structure, etc.
      - maximize focus on content
      - maximize pragmatic involvement (e.g. real-life decision making)
      - maximize real choice

5. tlgrfx-curriculum for adult literacy
   - sequencing: 10-15 initial consonants; final consonants; ...
   - emphasis on pragmatic rather than structural contrast, e.g.
     (What do you drink for breakfast?) c, t, m
     NOT: (What do you put on your head?) hat, cat, bat

6. related activities (general curriculum, all levels):
   a. 3-way division of vocab. for reading lesson:
      most important: preteach
      less important: post-test (but cf. c)
      least important: ignore
   b. less reliance on rigid grading & prepared materials for reading
   c. radical emphasis on broad comprehsnion, including inferencing;
      guess-from-context recognized as skill of learning (not reading),
      and thus separated from core of reading lesson
   d. emphasis on problem-solving
      Juan pesa 48 kg y su hermana Maria pesa 36 kg.
      Con cuantos kilogramos supera Juan a Maria?
   e. maximization of real choice in reading
   f. relation to decision-making, other pragmatic involvement
   g. book-skimming/scanning activities, including in-class grab-box,
      browsing & searching activities in library

ungrammar

7. Russian, vocab.

lyubit'	(love)	krasniy	(red)
dat'	(give)	beliy	(white)
vchera	(yesterday)		

   a. Brat prezidenta SShA lyubit i krasnoe i beloe vino.
   b. Russkiy professor amerikanskoy muziki vchera dal noviy
      sovetskiy zhurnal moey sestre Ol'ge.

8. elusiveness of grammatical categories:
   a. progressive in iterative meaning: 'Is your brother-in-law working now?'
   b. (teller, before cashing check:) 'Did you have an account with us?'

9. maximal pairs (for ungrammar drill):
   a. Spock jumped into the Black Hole, believing it to be an optical illusion.
      Spock jumped into the Black Hole, showing it to be an optical illusion.
   b. Max stayed home from school; he got sick.
      You're looking beautiful; what have you done to yourself?

10. passive grammar:

do		to		
Real		Imagined		
RESULT	PROCESS	DEPENDENT	NECESSARY	POSSIBLE
en	ing	will	must	can
ed		shall	should	could
		would	ought	might

DEMOTED: be, have, -s

graphics

11. the form of content
   a. schemata by type
   b. schemata by function

12. the form of form
   'structured composition'
   teaching composition as form-therapy